

TOP MARINES

CMC Envisions Faster, Better-Educated Corps

IN THE CORPS OF TOMORROW, better-educated and equipped Marines will project combat power from sea to shore faster than ever before. This is the goal 33rd Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen. Mike Hagee has for the future of the Corps. "Our mission for the nation as part

of the Navy-Marine Corps team is to project combat power ashore from the sea. Without a doubt, no fighting force in the world does that better than the United States Marine Corps and the United States Navy," he said. "During Operation Iraqi Freedom, we put about 70,000 Marines into Kuwait in less than

60 days with all their equipment and all their sustainment. Compared to how long it took us in Desert Storm that is really quite fast."

But this mission can be done better and quicker, he said. "With sea basing, we could put almost the same force together in less than two weeks."

Sea basing is a key concept in the Marine Corps' and Navy's transformational visions for how the services will rise to the challenges of the 21st century. The concept is just what it sounds like, bases at sea. "As enemy access to weapons of mass destruction grows, and the availability of overseas bases declines," sea basing will provide U.S. forces with secure, mobile, networked sea bases, according to the Naval Warfare Development Command.

Currently, Corps' assets are staged on Maritime Pre-positioning Force ships throughout the globe. "All the equipment is on board (one of these ships) and it's just as tightly packed as we can make it. What that means is normally you need to have a port and to get one item, you have to take it all off," the commandant said.

In Operation Iraqi Freedom, Marines offloaded 11 MPF ships to stage in Kuwait. "What would happen if we had not had Kuwait? We would have been sorely challenged," Gen Hagee said. "What we want to be able to do in the future, is have ships where we can do selective offloads."

His vision of sea basing is "a set of platforms that are going to compliment one another and actually fit together in a system of systems." The design of the platforms would allow only needed equipment to be offloaded, he said, "and I want to be able to do (an offload of equipment) at sea and I would like to be able to do it in a state-4 sea where there are 7-foot waves."

But he's not just talking about offloading at sea, his ideal would be to complete all stages of arrival and assembly at sea and cross the line of departure from sea. "Using the sea basing, you project combat power directly from the sea base to the

object," he said.

The groundwork for this is being laid now, but these are plans for the future, the commandant said. "I'm not going to see it, but corporals and sergeants and staff NCOs will see it."

What Marines will see now is the emphasis the commandant has put on better education and better training.

"Our most important asset and the most dangerous asset is a well-equipped, well-trained United States Marine. He or she is the best weapon system we have on today's battlefield," he said. He is committed to ensuring Marines are trained to meet any contingency.

"We want to provide the education and training that will allow the young Marine and the older Marine to function in (the chaotic battlefield of the future); to function in an environment of uncertainty, to be able to make decisions without having all the information that the Marine would like to have," the general said.

"We are actually changing how we educate our young Marines. We've already started that at the Sergeant's Course and the Corporal's Course."

The Marine Corps is working with colleges to ensure that many Marine Corps schools will be eligible for college credit. "Any enlisted Marine, if he stays in the Marine Corps for a full career, should be able to leave with at least a Bachelor of Science degree. Our commitment is to provide that opportunity; the Marine has to take the action to in fact do that."

The commandant is confident that many Marines will eagerly tackle this opportunity. "I strongly believe that there are sergeants out there who can do the things that lieutenants and captains do. The reason that I know they can do it is that I have seen them do it.

We just always haven't provided the education."

As the battlefield changes, so do the responsibilities of Marines and the Corps' goal is to prepare them for increased responsibilities. "A squad leader is still a squad leader, but today, those squads, those teams, can do much more with the same number of Marines than we could when I was young lieutenant," Gen. Hagee said.

"We're developing a concept, called distributive operations, where we'll have Marines widely dispersed across the battlefield. They're going to have a lot more responsibility, which (means) we need to ensure we have properly educated them."

This education is not just acquired in the college setting. Before the return to Iraq, more than 800 Marines, mostly enlisted, went to Arabic language training. Marines attended classes on Arabic culture and the religion of Islam, to prepare them for their new security and stability role in Iraq, he said.

His faith in his Marines and his commitment to training is paying off. "We are a very young force, about 67 percent are under the age of 25, and these young guys and gals, these young Americans, do an unbelievable job."

"Every individual Marine is important, whether you're (in Iraq) involved directly in operations or you're back here providing critical support to those Marines forward deployed, he said. "There are no unimportant jobs in the Marine Corps today."

Marines at bases and installations, in Iraq, Afghanistan and Haiti and in training environments throughout the world are getting the job done every day, making the senior leaders of the Corps and of the Department of Defense very proud, the general said. **M**

> Gen. Hagee testifies before members of the Senate Appropriations Committee concerning the Fiscal Year 2005 National Defense budget March 10.

Photo by Chief Petty Officer Craig P. Strawser



▲ OKINAWA, Japan — Gen. Hagee discusses the Medium Tactical Vehicle Replacement-Training Simulator with Cpl. Amina Welch during his visit with III Marine Expeditionary Force in Okinawa April 16, 2003.

Photo by Lance Cpl. Antonio J. Vega



◀ **EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla.** — Lance Cpl. Mike D. Mosier, left, of Bluffton, Ind., a light armored vehicle crewman assigned to 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, chats with Sgt. Maj. Estrada. The sergeant major and the commandant visited the MEU as it landed in northwest Florida to train aboard Eglin Air Force Base Dec. 14, 2003.

Photo by Gunnery Sgt. Keith A. Milks

TOP MARINES

Sgt. Maj. Reflects on Corps' Past

THE GEAR IS MORE ADVANCED, THE capabilities are improved, and the Marines are better trained and educated, but the basic esprit de corps remains the same, says Sgt. Maj. of the Marine Corps John L. Estrada.

The sergeant major should know. He's been keeping tabs on those changes for more than 30 years as a Marine.

For years the Marine Corps focused on coming from the sea, but new technology has greatly improved our ability to project and sustain combat power, the sergeant major said. "We proved that going into Afghanistan and Iraq. We still come in from the sea, but we can come in from other areas also, and we can reach much farther inland than ever before.

One improvement from when the 47-year-old Estrada first enlisted to now, is a piece of gear most Marines today consider old technology.

"Computers ... One of the things that has really changed during my time in is computers," he said. "We can now e-mail from the field, from the desert, from anywhere in the world." Estrada wasn't always an advocate of computers. He was reluctant to use the new technology when first faced with it.

"The earliest I started using computers was 1987 or 88. A lot of us did not want anything to do with (computers). Then I was forced to use it."

The computer is now pervasive throughout the Corps and used for essential tasks like administration and networking, and Estrada sees the value in technological advances. "We need to embrace new technology," he said. "It's going to take us ahead and make us a better force."

After all, new technologies, such as the MV-22 Osprey and the Expeditionary Warfighting Vehicle, are part of the capabilities bringing Marines to the fight faster, he said.

Technology, like global positioning systems, usually meets initial resistance until Marines realize its value. Some of the older folks think, "What happens when it stops working?" but I think it's what's happening when it is working – and it works most of the time – that's important.

"We should always be able to fall back on our (basic) knowledge, which we do very well as Marines," but not be afraid to take advantage of the new, Estrada said.

Something as simple as a field jacket has undergone radical improvements during his career, he said. "The old field jacket was pretty bad. With all of our warfighting (capabilities), if you have a Marine who is cold and uncom-

fortable, he can't concentrate on his job." Gortex was the Corps' lightweight, water-resistant answer.

Technology isn't the only change Estrada has seen; the basic structure of the Marine Corps is also different.

"We have a much leaner Corps than when I first came in," he said. In 1973, when Estrada joined, the Corps' end strength was a little more than 196,000. Today, the Corps active duty strength is about 177,000.

The people and attitudes were different then, too. The early '70s were a time filled with racial tension, he said. The force of the '70s was partly a drafted force and some joined as an escape from other situations. "Back in the day, you could (choose to) go to jail or go to the service.

"At boot camp, we were taught ... we're all one, we're all green." But this wasn't always the case. At his first duty station Estrada saw the tension caused by racial issues.

This is a situation that has vastly improved over the years, he said. "The attitude has changed. We are getting the best-qualified recruits and officer candidates in the footprints. We do a great job, to the point that I don't feel (racism) is an issue now."

What has held true during his career is the brotherhood, discipline and esprit de corps that first inspired him to join, said Estrada. Though born

in Trinidad, he considers Washington, where he spent most of his teen years, his hometown. A simple recruiting poster of a Marine in dress blues caught his eye on Pennsylvania Avenue and hooked him into the Corps.

"It was the poster that attracted me. I had heard about their reputation for

discipline, (being) the best fighting force in the world, so that's what motivated me. I was an easy sell for that recruiter that day," he said.

Though the Corps' reputation got him in, the sense of belonging to the best fighting force in the world has kept him. "Our discipline has remained

the same, the camaraderie and brotherhood are still the same. We're even still flying the CH-46 helicopter," Estrada said.

"I just wanted to continue with it. I did not know that I was going to stay in for 30 years, I have just been having fun." **M**

▼ **CORPUS CHRISTIE, Texas** — Sgt. Maj. Estrada talks with Marines who are going through flight training July 7, 2003.

Photo by Sgt. Branden O'Brien

